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SUBJECT: ICELAND: JUSTICE MINISTER FRUSTRATED -- AND
LOOKING FOR HELP ON SAR CAPABILITY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CAROL VAN VOORST, REASONS 1.4 (B & D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with the Icelandic Justice Minister 3/22 as part of post's roll-out of the U.S. decision to remove fighter aircraft and CSAR helicopters from Naval Air Station Keflavik (NASKEF). The Minister expressed deep disappointment at the "unilateral" decision and listed other Allied countries he calculated might fill U.S. shoes. He did not, however, rule out continued defense cooperation with the U.S. and urged that the U.S. team bring detailed offers to the negotiating table. As the minister responsible for the Coast Guard, he was especially focused on the need to avoid any drop in SAR capabilities when the U.S. helicopters leave. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, with poloff as notetaker, called on Icelandic Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs Bjorn Bjarnason March 22 to discuss the U.S. announcement March 15 that we would remove by the end of the fiscal year the four F-15 jets and the five combat search-and-rescue (CSAR) helicopters now stationed there.

Shock and Thaw

¶3. (C) The Ambassador asked Bjarnason his views on necessary next steps to continue cooperation in the security and safety areas that fall under his responsibilities. Bjarnason questioned U.S. dependability as a guarantor of Iceland's security and expressed deep disappointment with the U.S. decision.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador reviewed the several years of U.S. efforts to prepare the Icelanders for the departure of the aircraft and summarized "feverish" preparations now underway in Washington to come to Reykjavik in a few days with clear proposals on how we can provide Iceland with a visible and credible defense. In response, Bjarnason pulled out a 2004 memorandum that his ministry had prepared regarding "co-operation, exchange of information and mutual assistance between Iceland and USA" and conceded that he was still interested in working together with us in all these areas, viz., civil defense, WMD issues, border control and organized crime, training of the Icelandic Special Police (SWAT) Force, and search and rescue. The last was his greatest concern, he said, and replacing the U.S. CSAR helicopters would be his highest priority over the next several weeks. The Icelandic government had been planning and budgeting to take over the

SAR function in FY08; the advanced timetable left it with a looming critical gap in capabilities.

¶5. (C) Bjarnason emphasized that Iceland has "more cards to play than the bilateral one." He noted Foreign Minister Geir Haarde's recent contacts with the Norwegians, British, and French, as well as Danish interest in possibly formalizing North Atlantic SAR cooperation. He said, however, he had already been approached by Sikorsky, which expressed interest in selling helicopters to Iceland, and expected to hear from other vendors as well. Queried by the Ambassador, he confirmed Iceland was also looking into the option of contracting with a private firm for temporary SAR services.

¶6. (C) Comment: Bjarnason's father was Foreign Minister when Iceland signed the 1951 Defense Agreement, and Bjarnason has been a decades-long supporter and defender of bilateral defense cooperation. The key take-away message from this meeting is that Iceland is eager to see what we can put on the table at the upcoming bilateral discussion and that, as Haarde told U/S Burns, the search and rescue issue is of critical and immediate concern to the Icelandic government. End comment.
van Voorst